

REMARKS

Favorable reconsideration and allowance of the present application are respectfully requested in view of the foregoing amendments and the following remarks.

As an initial matter, Applicants would like to thank Examiner Torres-Velazquez for the courtesy and assistance she extended during the recent personal interview on October 19, 2004. During the interview, the Examiner suggested an amendment to independent claims 20 and 31 to further clarify the claimed limitations. Thus, in accordance with the Examiner's suggestion, Applicants have rewritten independent claims 20 and 31 as new claims 39 and 51. It is noted, however, that the amendment is being made for purposes of clarification only, and not for any reason whatsoever relating to patentability.

Thus, claims 39-56, including independent claims 39 and 51, now remain pending in the present application. Independent claim 39, for example, is directed to a composite fabric comprising a nonwoven web. The nonwoven web is formed from continuous splittable multicomponent thermoplastic fibers having individual segments exposed on an outer perimeter thereof. Various segments of these fibers may thus separate from the web during entanglement, thereby improving the bulk, softness, and capillary tension of the resulting fabric. (Appl. p. 9). The nonwoven web is also creped. Creping the nonwoven web may open its pore structure, thereby increasing its permeability. Moreover, creping may also enhance the stretchability of the web in the machine and/or cross-machine directions, as well as increase its softness and bulk. (Appl. p. 14).

In addition, the aforementioned nonwoven web is hydraulically entangled with a fibrous material that constitutes greater than about 50% by weight of the fabric, and in some embodiments, from about 60% to about 90% by weight of the fabric. The fibrous material contains cellulosic fibers (e.g., pulp fibers), which as a result of hydraulic entanglement, are driven into the nonwoven web. (See e.g., Appl. pg. 22).

In the Office Action, previous independent claims 20 and 31 were rejected under 35 U.S.C. §103(a) as being obvious over U.S. Patent No. 6,375,889 to Holmes, et al. in view of U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2002/0034907 to Groitzsch, et al. As discussed in the recent interview, however, the combination of these references still fails to disclose one or more aspects of independent claims 39 and 51. For example, as stated, independent claim 39 is directed to a composite fabric containing a fibrous material hydraulically entangled with a creped nonwoven web. The fibrous material constitutes at least about 50% by weight of the fabric and contains cellulosic fibers (e.g., pulp fibers) that are driven into the nonwoven web.

Holmes, et al. is directed to a compacted nonwoven fabric that preferably comprises 50-100% polyester fibers, with the remaining fibers (if any) comprising rayon, cotton, bicomponent fibers, and the like. For example, as shown in Fig. 1 of Holmes, et al., a web of loose fibers 2 is first produced by a series of cards or any other known equipment capable of producing an unbound web of fibers. The web 2 is entangled with water jets 10 to form a coherent, durable nonwoven web 12. The uncompact web is then microcreped with apparatus 20. (Col 2, ll. 6-54).

Although Holmes, et al. does mention the steps of entanglement with water jets and microcreping, the resulting fabric is simply not the same as set forth in independent

claims 39 and 51. For example, entanglement is only used in Holmes, et al. to form a “coherent, durable” nonwoven web. To the contrary, hydraulic entanglement is specifically required in claims 39 and 51 to drive the cellulosic fibers into a nonwoven web. That is, to the extent even present in Holmes, et al., cellulosic fibers are not driven into a nonwoven web as a result of hydraulic entanglement, but are instead simply part of the blend used to form an unbonded web of loose fibers prior to entanglement. (Col. 2, ll. 6-54). Further, the web of Holmes, et al. is not even creped until “after” entanglement with water jets. In addition, as correctly noted by the Examiner, Holmes, et al. does not disclose a nonwoven web that contains splittable, multicomponent thermoplastic fibers.

Furthermore, as discussed in the recent interview, Groitzsch, et al. also suffers from some of the same deficiencies. These deficiencies are perhaps best illustrated by Examples 1-4 of Groitzsch, et al. (pp. 4-5). In Examples 1-2, for instance, a carded staple fiber pile is formed from 60% viscose staple fibers and 40% polyester fibers, and then hydraulically entangled on each side. A textured polyester multifilament yarn is then shot through, in the warp direction, the hydraulically entangled nonwoven fabric. (pgs. 4-5). In Example 3, the carded staple fiber pile of Examples 1-2 is substituted with 100% viscose staple fibers. (pg. 5). Finally, in Example 4, a non-bonded endless filament (polyamide/polyester) nonwoven fabric is first formed. The non-bonded web is then hydraulically entangled and shot through with polyester yarns. As evidenced by these examples of Groitzsch, et al., cellulosic fibers are simply not driven into a nonwoven web as a result of hydraulic entanglement, such as required by independent claims 39 and 51.

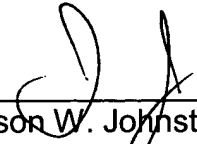
As an additional note, Applicants also submit that one of ordinary skill in the art would not have found it obvious to modify Holmes, et al. in the manner suggested in the Office Action. For example, as stated above, the fabric of Holmes, et al. is formed from a web of loose fibers that is hydraulically entangled to form a coherent structure. The loose fibers used to form the web are staple fibers. (See e.g., Col. 3, l. 3 and Col. 4, l. 4). To the contrary, independent claims 39 and 51 each requires the use of continuous fibers (or filaments), such as spunbonded fibers. One of ordinary skill in the art would simply not have found it obvious to substitute continuous splittable multicomponent fibers for the fibers of Holmes, et al., regardless of the teachings of Groitzsch, et al.

Thus, for at least the reasons set forth above, Applicants respectfully submit that independent claims 39 and 51 patentably define over the cited references, taken singularly or in any proper combination. Further, for at least the reasons set forth above relating to corresponding independent claims 39 and 51, Applicants also submit that dependent claims 40-50 and 52-56 patentably define over the references cited. However, Applicants note that the patentability of such dependent claims does not necessarily hinge on the patentability of independent claims 39 and 51. In particular, some or all of these claims may possess features that are independently patentable, regardless of the patentability of claims 39 and 51.

It is believed that the present application is in complete condition for allowance and favorable action is respectfully requested. Examiner Torres-Velazquez is invited and encouraged to telephone the undersigned, however, should any issues remain after consideration of this Amendment. Please charge any fees required by this Amendment to Deposit Account No. 04-1403.

Respectfully submitted,

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